

2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Algeria

OFFICE OF INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and worship. The constitution declares Islam to be the state religion and prohibits state institutions from behaving in a manner incompatible with Islam. The law grants all individuals the right to practice their religion if they respect public order and regulations. Offending or insulting any religion is a criminal offense. Proselytizing Muslims by non-Muslims is a crime. On May 28, prominent Mozabite (from the M'zah valley region) Ibadi Muslim human rights activist Kamel Eddine Fekhar died following a nearly 60-day hunger strike. Fekhar was in pretrial detention following his March 31 arrest for "incitement of racial hatred" for a Facebook post in which he accused local officials in Ghardaia of discriminatory practices towards Ibadis. According to media reports, a court in Akbou, Bejaia fined an unnamed Christian for the "exercise of non-Muslim worship without authorization." Two separate courts upheld acquittals of two individuals charged with "inciting a Muslim to change his/her religion" in March and "undermining Islam" in April. There were 286 cases pertaining to Ahmadi Muslims pending with the Supreme Court at year's end. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious leaders said the government continued to be unresponsive to religious groups' requests to register or reregister. During the year, the government closed nine Christian churches. A video posted on Facebook by the Protestant Full Gospel Church in Tizi Ouzou, described by Human Rights Watch as the country's largest church, showed police pulling congregants from their chairs during services and forcing them outside. The then-minister of interior, after speaking of churches he ordered closed in disparaging terms, stated that the churches were unlicensed to hold Christian services. On March 17, the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA) informed clerics they would no longer be required to submit texts of their

sermons to authorities for approval; however, MRA officials said the government sometimes monitored sermons delivered in mosques for inappropriate content, such as advocating violent extremism. The government continued to regulate the importation of all books, including religious materials. Senior government officials continued to oppose calls by extremist groups for violence in the name of Islam. They also continued to criticize the spread of what they characterized as “foreign” religious influences, such as Salafism, Wahhabism, Shia Islam, and Ahmadi Islam. Catholic foreign religious workers faced visa delays and refusals that hindered the Church’s work and caused the Catholic Church to cancel a bishops’ conference scheduled for September 20 in Algiers.

Some Christian leaders and congregants spoke of family members abusing Muslims who converted to or expressed an interest in Christianity. Individuals engaged in religious practice other than Sunni Islam reported they had experienced threats and intolerance, including in the media. On July 18, unknown individuals knocked over the headstone for Mozabite Ibadi Muslim human rights activist Kamel Eddine Fekhar’s grave. Media sometimes criticized Ahmadi Islam and Shia Islam as “sects” or “deviations” from Islam or as “foreign.” Private news outlets, including *El Khabar* and *Ennaha*, referred to Ahmadis as “sects” of Islam in reporting in June and July, respectively.

The Ambassador and other embassy officers frequently encouraged senior government officials in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Religious Affairs, Justice, and Interior to promote religious tolerance and discussed the difficulties Ahmadis, Christians, and other religious minority groups faced in registering as associations, importing religious materials, and obtaining visas. Embassy officers in meetings and programs with religious leaders from both Sunni Muslim and minority religious groups, as well as with other members of the public, focused on pluralism and religious moderation. The embassy used special events, social media, and speakers’ programs to emphasize a message of religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 42.3 million (midyear 2019 estimate), more than 99 percent of whom are Sunni Muslims following the Maliki school. Religious groups together constituting less than 1 percent of the population include Christians, Jews, Ahmadi Muslims, Shia Muslims, and a community of Ibadi Muslims residing principally in the province of Ghardaia. Some religious leaders estimate there are fewer than 200 Jews.

The Christian community includes Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, members of the Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA), Lutherans, the Reformed Church, Anglicans, and an estimated 1,000 Egyptian Coptic Christians. Religious leaders' unofficial estimates of the number of Christians range from 20,000 to 200,000. According to the Christian advocacy nonprofit organization Open Doors USA, there are approximately 125,000 Christians. According to government officials and religious leaders, foreign residents make up most of the Christian population. Among the Christian population, the proportion of students and immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa without legal status has also increased in recent years. Christian leaders say citizens who are Christians predominantly belong to Protestant groups.

Christians reside mostly in Algiers, the Kabylie region in Bejaia, and the provinces of Tizi Ouzou, Annaba, Ouargla, and Oran.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution declares Islam to be the state religion and prohibits state institutions from engaging in behavior incompatible with Islamic values. The constitution provides for freedom of worship in accordance with the law and states freedom of conscience and freedom of opinion are inviolable.

The law does not prohibit conversion from Islam, but proselytizing Muslims by non-Muslims is a criminal offense. The law prescribes a maximum punishment of one million dinars (\$8,400) and five years' imprisonment for anyone who "incites, constrains, or utilizes means of seduction intending to convert a Muslim to another religion; or by using establishments of teaching, education, health, social, culture, training ... or any financial means." Making, storing, or distributing printed documents or audiovisual materials with the intent of "shaking the faith" of a Muslim is also illegal and subject to the same penalties.

The law criminalizes "offending the Prophet Muhammad" or any other prophets. The penal code provides a punishment of three to five years in prison and/or a fine of 50,000 to 100,000 dinars (\$420-\$840) for denigrating the creed or prophets of Islam through writing, drawing, declaration, or any other means. The law also criminalizes insults directed at any other religion, with the same penalties.

The law grants all individuals the right to practice their religion as long as they respect public order and regulations.

The constitution establishes a High Islamic Council and states the council shall encourage and promote *ijtihad* (the use of independent reasoning as a source of Islamic law for issues not precisely addressed in the Quran) and express opinions on religious questions presented for its review. The president appoints the members of the council and oversees its work. The constitution requires the council to submit regular reports to the president on its activities. A presidential decree further defines the council's mission as taking responsibility for all questions related to Islam, for correcting mistaken perceptions, and for promoting the true fundamentals of the religion and a correct understanding of it. The council may issue fatwas at the request of the president.

The law requires any group, religious or otherwise, to register with the government as an association prior to conducting any activities. Under the Associations Law passed in 2012, all organizations previously registered were required to reregister with the government. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) grants association status to religious groups; only registered associations are officially recognized. The MOI's registration requirements for national-level associations stipulate the founding members must

furnish documents proving their identities, addresses, and other biographic details; provide police and judicial records to prove their good standing in society; demonstrate they have founding members residing in at least one quarter of the country's provinces to prove the association merits national standing; submit the association's constitution signed by its president; and submit documents indicating the location of its headquarters. The law requires the ministry to provide a receipt for the application once it has received all the required documentation and to respond within 60 days of submission of the completed application. The law states applicants are *de facto* approved if the ministry does not decide within the 60-day limit. The law grants the government full discretion in making registration decisions but provides applicants an opportunity to appeal a denial to an administrative tribunal. For associations seeking to register at the local or provincial level, application requirements are similar, but the association's membership and sphere of activity is strictly limited to the area in which it registers. An association registered at the *wilaya* (provincial) level is confined to that specific *wilaya* (province).

The MRA has the right to review registration applications of religious associations, but the MOI makes the final decision. The law, however, does not specify additional requirements for religious associations or further specify the MRA's role in the process.

The National Committee for Non-Muslim Worship, a government entity, is responsible by law for facilitating the registration process for all non-Muslim groups. The MRA presides over the committee, composed of senior representatives of the Ministries of National Defense, Interior, and Foreign Affairs, the presidency, national police, national gendarmerie, and the governmental National Human Rights Council (CNDH).

The constitution requires a presidential candidate to be Muslim. Individuals of other faiths than Islam may hold other public offices and work within the government.

The law prohibits religious associations from receiving funding from political parties or foreign entities. The constitution prohibits the establishment of political parties based on religion. Membership in the Islamic Salvation Front, a political party banned since 1992, remains illegal.

The law specifies the manner and conditions under which religious services, Muslim or otherwise, must take place. The law states religious demonstrations are subject to regulation and the government may shut down any religious service taking place in private homes or in outdoor settings without official approval. With the exception of daily prayers, which are permissible anywhere, Islamic services may take place only in state-sanctioned mosques. Friday prayers are further limited to certain specified mosques. Non-Islamic religious services must take place only in buildings registered with the state for the exclusive purpose of religious practice, be run by a registered religious association, open to the public, and marked as such on the exterior. A request for permission to observe special non-Islamic religious events must be submitted to the relevant *wali* (governor) at least five days before the event, and the event must occur in buildings accessible to the public. Requests must include information on three principal organizers of the event, its purpose, the number of attendees anticipated, a schedule of events, and its planned location. The individuals identified as the event's organizers also must obtain a permit from the *wali*. The *wali* may request the organizers move the location of an event or deny permission for it to take place if he deems it would endanger public order or harm "national constants," "good mores," or "symbols of the revolution." If unauthorized meetings go forward without approval, police may disperse the participants. Individuals who fail to disperse at the behest of police are subject to arrest and a prison term of two to 12 months under the penal code.

The penal code states only government-authorized imams, whom the state hires and trains, may lead prayers in mosques and penalizes anyone else who preaches in a mosque with a fine of up to 100,000 dinars (\$840) and a prison sentence of one to three years. Fines as high as 200,000 dinars (\$1,700) and prison sentences of three to five years are stipulated for any person, including government-authorized imams, who acts "against the noble nature of the mosque" or in a manner "likely to offend public cohesion, as determined by a judge." The law states such acts include exploiting the mosque to achieve purely material or personal objectives or with a view to harming persons or groups.

By law, the MRA provides financial support to mosques and pays the salaries of imams and other religious personnel, as well as for health care and retirement benefits. The law

also provides for the payment of salaries and benefits to non-Muslim religious leaders who are citizens. The Ministry of Labor regulates the amount of an individual imam's or mosque employee's pay, and likewise sets the salaries of citizen non-Muslim religious leaders based on their position within their individual churches.

The Ministries of Religious Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Interior, and Commerce must approve the importation of all religious texts and items, except those intended for personal use. Authorities generally consider "importation" to be approximately 20 or more religious texts or items.

The law gives authorities broad power to ban books that run counter to the constitution, "the Muslim religion and other religions, national sovereignty and unity, the national identity and cultural values of society, national security and defense concerns, public order concerns, and the dignity of the human being and individual and collective rights." A 2017 decree establishes a commission within the MRA to review importation of the Quran. This decree requires all applications to include a full copy of the text and other detailed information about the applicant and text. The ministry has three to six months to review the text, with the absence of a response after that time constituting a rejection of the importation application. A separate 2017 decree covering religious texts other than the Quran states, "The content of religious books for import, regardless of format, must not undermine the religious unity of society, the national religious reference, public order, good morals, fundamental rights and liberties, or the law." The importer must submit the text and other information, and the ministry must respond within 30 days. A nonresponse after this period is considered a rejection. Religious texts distributed without authorization may be seized and destroyed.

The law states the government must approve any modification of structures intended for non-Islamic collective worship.

The family code prohibits Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men unless the man converts to Islam. The code does not prohibit Muslim men from marrying non-Muslim women. Under the law, children born to a Muslim father are considered Muslim

regardless of the mother's religion. In the event of a divorce, a court determines the custody of any children.

The Ministries of National Education and Religious Affairs require, regulate, and fund the study of Islam in public schools. Religious education focuses on Islamic studies but includes information on Christianity and Judaism and is mandatory at the primary and secondary school levels. The Ministry of National Education requires private schools to adhere to curricula in line with national standards, particularly regarding the teaching of Islam, or risk closure.

The law states discrimination based on religion is prohibited and guarantees state protection for non-Muslims and for the "toleration and respect of different religions." It does not prescribe penalties for religious discrimination.

The CNDH monitors and evaluates human rights issues, including matters related to religious freedom. The law authorizes the CNDH to conduct investigations of alleged abuses, issue opinions and recommendations, conduct awareness campaigns, and work with other government authorities to address human rights issues. The CNDH may address religious concerns to appropriate government offices on behalf of individuals or groups it believes are not being treated fairly. The CNDH does not have the authority to enforce its decisions but may refer matters to the relevant administrative or criminal court. It submits an annual report to the president, who appoints the agency's members.

The government does not register religious affiliations of the citizenry and does not print religious affiliations on documents such as national identification cards.

By law, individuals who have converted from Islam to another religion are ineligible to receive an inheritance via succession.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

On May 28, prominent Mozabite Ibadi Muslim human rights activist Kamel Eddine Fekhar died following a nearly 60-day hunger strike. He had been in pretrial detention since his arrest on March 31 for “incitement of racial hatred” for a Facebook post in which he accused local officials in Ghardaia of discriminatory practices, such as more frequent arrests, questioning, and harsher sentences, towards Ibadi Muslims. An AP report stated that Fekhar also was known for his work on behalf of the country’s minority populations, including Christians. In late May his health deteriorated, and prison authorities transferred him to a hospital in Blida on May 27. The Ministry of Justice opened an in-depth investigation on May 29 into the circumstances of Fekhar’s death but did not release its findings by year’s end. Civil society organizations and human rights activists called for updates regarding the investigation and for charges against Ghardaia authorities to no avail.

The government continued to enforce the ban on proselytizing by non-Muslim groups. According to media reports, authorities continued to arrest, jail, and fine several Christians on charges of proselytizing by non-Muslims, which prompted churches to restrict some activities unrelated to proselytizing, such as the distribution of religious literature and holding of events in local community centers that Muslims might attend. On June 20, a court in Akbou, Bejaia handed down a 50,000 dinar (\$420) fine to an unnamed Christian for the “exercise of non-Muslim worship without authorization.” The prosecutor had requested a two-year prison sentence. According to media reports, a group of Christians held Sunday services in a tent after authorities closed the EPA-affiliated “Church of Refuge” in October 2018.

Morning Star News reported on June 16 a judge gave a Christian man in Mostaganem who converted from Islam a two-month suspended prison sentence and fined him 100,000 dinars (\$840). According to *Morning Star News*, the man invited a Christian couple to his home to pray.

According to *Morning Star News*, on April 17, a court in Tizi Ouzou upheld a previous court’s acquittal of Rachid Ouali, who had converted from Islam to Christianity. Ouali was one of five individuals acquitted by a court in Bouira on December 25, 2018 on

charges of “inciting a Muslim to change his religion” and “performing religious worship in an unauthorized place.” Ouali’s charges regarding his Christian faith were brought before a judge a second time as part of his divorce proceedings. According to Morning Star News, Ouali’s Muslim wife (who subsequently divorced him) had filed a complaint in July 2018 accusing the five individuals of having brought her to a church service and trying to persuade her to convert to Christianity.

Morning Star News reported on February 27, a court upheld an unnamed man’s December 30, 2018 acquittal of charges of undermining Islam. The man’s wife filed charges against him of undermining Islam in 2017 after he converted to Christianity.

Ahmadi leaders stated there were 286 cases against community members pending with the Supreme Court as of the end of the year. Charges included operating an unregistered religious association, collecting funds without authorization, and holding prayers in unauthorized locations. Community representatives said in some cases police confiscated passports and educational diplomas and in others employers placed Ahmadi Muslims under investigation on administrative leave. Ahmadi representatives stated they believed these individuals would appear before the Supreme Court in the next three to six years and that in the meantime, they would be prevented from employment. At year’s end, there were no reports of Ahmadi Muslims imprisoned on charges related to their faith.

According to the MOI, religious associations were de facto registered if the ministry did not reject their applications within 60 days of submission and that if the ministry considered the application incomplete, it did not issue a receipt for the application. NGOs and Ahmadiyya Muslim religious leaders said the MOI routinely failed to provide them with a receipt acknowledging they had submitted a completed registration application. Ahmadis reported they continued to receive no government response to their outstanding request to meet with Minister of Religious Affairs Youcef Belmehdi or another senior ministry official to discuss their registration concerns.

The Ahmadi community continued to report administrative difficulties and harassment since the community is not a registered association and is unable to meet and collect

donations. Members of the community said it tried to register with the MRA and Ministry of Interior (MOI) as a Muslim group in 2012 and 2016, but the government rejected its applications because it regards Ahmadis as non-Muslims. The government said in September it would approve the community's registration as non-Muslims, but the Ahmadis said they would not file as anything but Muslims.

In 2014, the EPA and the Seventh-day Adventist Church submitted paperwork to renew their registrations that had been issued prior to the passage of the 2012 Associations Law but as of year's end had still not received a response from the MOI. According to a pastor associated with the EPA, the Church resubmitted its 2014 application in 2015, but was never reregistered despite several follow-ups with the government.

Some religious groups stated they functioned as registered 60 days after having submitted their application, even though they had not received an MOI confirmation. Such groups stated, however, that service providers, such as utilities and banks, refused to provide services without proof of registration. As a result, these groups faced the same administrative obstacles as unregistered associations. They also had limited standing to pursue legal complaints and could not engage in charitable activities, which required bank accounts.

Most Christian leaders stated they had no contact with the National Committee for Non-Muslim Worship, despite its legal mandate to work with them on registration, since its establishment in 2006. Other MRA officials, however, met with Christian leaders to hear their views periodically during the year, including receiving complaints about the registration process. Christian leaders continued to say some Protestant groups avoided applying for recognition and instead operated discreetly because they lacked confidence in the registration process. In a joint statement to the UN Human Rights Council on September 18, the World Evangelical Alliance, the World Council of Churches, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, and the Jubilee Campaign, in association with the EPA expressed "grave concern at the ongoing closure of Protestant churches in Algeria," and stated that "authorities continue to refuse to recognize both the umbrella organization of the Protestant churches [the EPA] and churches which requested to be registered locally." The statement also said that the MRA "has not issued a single permit" [since passage of

the law] to approve church buildings. According to the statement, this lefts churches in the country in “a legal grey zone of non-recognition, giving authorities the latitude to close one building after another.”

According to media reports and EPA statements, during the year the government closed nine churches, compared to eight church closures between November 2017 and December 2018. The government also closed one Christian bookstore. All were affiliated with the EPA. Media reported eight EPA-affiliated church closures occurred in September and October. At year’s end, 14 churches affiliated with the EPA in the provinces of Bejaia and Tizi Ouzou and one non-EPA church in Tizi Ouzou remained closed.

The government said the churches it closed were operating without government authorization, illegally printing evangelical publications, and failing to meet building safety codes. On October 23, Minister of Interior and Local Administration Salah Eddine Dahomoune told media, “We closed 49 chicken coops and warehouses unlicensed to practice Christian rites.”

Police closed the Protestant Church of the Full Gospel in Tizi Ouzou, which Human Rights Watch described as the largest Protestant church in the country, on October 15. The church posted a video on Facebook showing police interrupting the service, pulling congregants from their chairs and forcing them out of the building. According to one media report, while closing the church, police hit Pastor Salah Chalah, who is also the head of the EPA, striking him with a baton. According to NGOs, on October 17, police arrested 17 Christians in front of the Tizi Ouzou governorate, where they had staged a peaceful sit-in to protest the church closure.

Some Christian citizens said they continued to use homes or businesses as “house churches” due to government delays in issuing the necessary legal authorizations. Other Christian groups, particularly in the Kabylie region, reportedly held worship services more discreetly.

According to the MRA, the government continued to allow government employees to wear religious clothing including the hijab, crosses, and the *niqab*. Authorities continued to instruct some female government employees, such as security force members, not to wear head and face coverings that they said could complicate the performance of their official duties.

On March 17, then-minister of religious affairs Mohamed Aissa informed clerics that they would no longer be required to submit texts of their sermons to authorities for approval. MRA officials said the government did not regularly prescreen and approve sermons before imams delivered them during Friday prayers. They also stated the government sometimes provided preapproved sermon topics for Friday prayers to address the public's concerns following major events or to encourage civic participation through activities such as voting in elections. The MRA said it did not punish imams who did not discuss the suggested sermon topics.

MRA officials said the government continued to monitor the sermons delivered in mosques. According to MRA officials, if a ministry inspector suspected an imam's sermon was inappropriate, particularly if it supported violent extremism, the inspector had the authority to summon the imam to a "scientific council" composed of Islamic law scholars and other imams who assessed the sermon's "correctness." The government could decide to relieve an imam of duty if he was summoned multiple times. The government also monitored activities in mosques for possible security-related offenses, such as recruitment by extremist groups, and prohibited the use of mosques as public meeting places outside of regular prayer hours.

According to Open Doors USA, a U.S. NGO, officials from the country's intelligence services were frequently present at church services.

On April 14, Minister of Religious Affairs Belmehdi allowed mosque management committees to meet. The previous minister had halted their work in June 2018, stating extremist groups had infiltrated the committees.

According to Catholic representatives, the government granted permits for the importation of Catholic religious texts during the year, including Catholic literature and

Bibles. The EPA received import authorization for an order of Bibles and religious literature placed in 2017. Out of 10,000 books, the EPA received 2,000 Bibles and 2,600 copies of the New Testament. Both included versions in French, Arabic, English, and Tamazight. According to the EPA, it had not received details on the remaining books ordered.

Non-Islamic religious texts, music, and video media continued to be available on the informal market, and stores and vendors in the capital sold Bibles in several languages, including Arabic, French, and Tamazight. On January 13, the government approved the first versions of the Quran in the Berber language, Tamazight, in the Arabic script.

The government continued to enforce its prohibition on dissemination of any literature portraying violence as a legitimate precept of Islam.

Christian leaders said courts were sometimes biased against non-Muslims in family law cases, such as divorce or custody proceedings.

According to religious community leaders, some local administrations did not always verify religions before conducting marriage ceremonies. As such, some couples were able to marry despite the family code prohibition against Muslim women marrying non-Muslim men.

Sources stated Christian leaders were able to visit Christians in prison, regardless of the nature of their offense.

Both private and state-run media continued to produce reports throughout the year examining what they said were foreign ties and dangers of religious groups, such as Shia Muslims, Ahmadi Muslims, and Salafists.

Church groups continued to say the government did not respond in a timely fashion to their requests for visas for foreign religious workers and visiting scholars and speakers, resulting in de facto visa refusals. One Christian leader continued to say the government did not grant or refused 50 percent of visas requested for Catholic Church workers. As of the end of the year, three members of the Catholic Church had been waiting one year

for visas. Catholic and Protestant groups continued to identify the delays as significantly hindering religious practice. One religious leader again identified lack of visa issuances as a major impediment to maintaining contact with the church's international organization. Higher-level intervention with officials responsible for visa issuance by senior MRA and Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials at the request of religious groups sometimes resulted in the issuance of long-term visas, according to those groups. A representative from the Catholic Church reported that visa delays and refusals caused the Church to cancel its annual Regional Episcopal Conference of North Africa meeting, which it scheduled for September 20 in Algiers.

The government, along with local private contributors, continued to fund mosque construction. The government and public and private companies also funded the preservation of some Catholic churches, particularly those of historical importance. The Province of Oran, for example, continued to work in partnership with local donors on an extensive renovation of Notre Dame de Santa Cruz as part of its cultural patrimony.

Government-owned radio stations continued to broadcast Christmas and Easter services in French, although many Christians said they would prefer services be broadcast in Arabic or Tamazight. The country's efforts to stem religious extremism included dedicated state-run religious television and radio channels and messages of moderation integrated into mainstream media. After Friday prayers, religious programs countering extremism were broadcast. Some examples included *Au Coeur de Islam* (At the Heart of Islam) on Radio Channel 3 and *Dans le Sens de l'Islam* (Understanding the Meaning of Islam) on national television.

Government officials continued to invite prominent Christian and Jewish citizens to events celebrating national occasions, such as Revolutionary Day celebrations at the People's Palace on November 1.

Senior government officials continued to publicly condemn acts of violence committed in the name of Islam and urged all members of society to reject extremist behavior.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some Christian converts said they and others in their communities continued to keep a low profile due to concern for their personal safety and the potential for legal, familial, career, and social problems. Other converts practiced their new religion openly, according to members of the Christian community.

Several Christian leaders said some citizens who converted, or who expressed interest in learning more about Christianity, were assaulted by family members, or otherwise pressured to recant their conversions.

According to religious leaders, some individuals who openly engaged in any religious practice other than Sunni Islam reported that family, neighbors, or others criticized their religious practice, pressured them to convert, and occasionally insinuated they could be in danger because of their choice.

In May the *Algiers Herald* reported Islamic scholar Said Djabelkhir called for a separation of religion and state and criticized the Muslim Brotherhood for its ideology and Saudi Arabia for its role “propagat[ing] Islamic fundamentalism.”

Media criticized religious communities it portrayed as “sects” or “deviations” from Islam or as “foreign,” such as Ahmadi Muslims and Shia Muslims. Private news outlets such as *El Khabar* and *Ennahar* referred to Ahmadis as “sects” of Islam in reporting in June and July, respectively.

On July 18, unknown individuals knocked over the headstone for Mozabite Ibadi Muslim human rights activist Kamel Eddine Fekhar’s grave.

Christian leaders continued to say when Christian converts died, family members sometimes buried them according to Islamic rites, and their churches had no standing to intervene on their behalf. Christian groups reported some villages continued not to permit Christians to be buried alongside Muslims. In these cases, Christians were buried according to Islamic rites so their remains could stay near their families.

In an August report, Arab Barometer, an international research consortium focusing on the Middle East and North Africa, found “a clear divide” in the country on the role of religion. When asked if the country would be better off if more religious persons held public office, 44 percent of those polled agreed while 45 percent disagreed, effectively unchanged since a similar survey in 2013. Similarly, 42 percent of those polled believed religious leaders should have say over decisions in the government, compared with 48 percent who disagreed. More than half of those polled, 51 percent, disagreed with the view that religion should be separate from social and economic life. Overall, the poll found general support for basing the country’s laws on sharia. The NGO also found that only 15 percent of individuals between ages 15 and 29 in the country identified as religious. This represented a decline of 3 percentage points in the country’s youth since the last survey in 2017.

Some Christian leaders continued to state they had good relations with Muslims in their communities, with only isolated incidents of vandalism or harassment. Christian and Muslim leaders hosted each other during the year. In March the Catholic Church held an interfaith event in which an imam and Catholic priest participated in a panel together. On May 16, the National Cathedral, Notre Dame D’Afrique, held an event during Ramadan to commemorate International Day of Living Together; which Muslims and Christians attended. In September Notre Dame D’Afrique held a national cleanup day in which local citizens participated, including young Muslims.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officers met with government officials from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Interior, Justice, and Religious Affairs to discuss the difficulties Ahmadi and Shia Muslims, Christian, and other minority religious groups faced in registering as associations, importing religious materials, obtaining visas. They also raised church closures and jailed activists.

The Ambassador and other embassy officers met during the year with government-affiliated and independent religious leaders and with representatives of Muslim and Christian communities to discuss interreligious dialogue and tolerance, and in the case of religious minorities, their rights and legal status.

In August the Ambassador discussed interfaith dialogue and tolerance while visiting the Center of Pierre Claverie in Oran, named after a Catholic bishop known for his advocacy of interreligious dialogue and who was killed in 1996. During a press conference, the Ambassador reiterated the importance of religious freedom.

Embassy officials discussed the practice of religion, its intersection with politics, religious tolerance, and the religious and political roles of women with religious and political leaders, as well as with the Muslim Scholars Association and High Islamic Council. Visiting officials from the Department of State regularly raised religious freedom issues in meetings with civil society and government officials.